# 2005 Annual Report NC Million Acre Initiative

Presented to the Governor of North Carolina and the Environmental Review Commission of the North Carolina General Assembly

Sept. 1, 2005

By the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources Office of Conservation and Community Affairs

#### **The Latest Numbers**

At the end of the sixth full year of the North Carolina Million Acre Initiative (Jan. 1, 1999 – Dec. 31, 2004), private and public land protection partners across the state have permanently protected an additional **352,090** "Million Acre" acres. These partners reported adding **71,451** of those acres during the 2004 calendar year. This past year's activities represent an increase in the rate of land protection in North Carolina from the previous year. The Ecosystem Enhancement Program, begun in 2003, closed on 18,892 acres of permanently protected land, contributing significantly to the 2004 total. Because of the EEP emphasis on partnerships, many of those acres show up as part of other agencies' or land trusts' totals.

The table at the end of this report describes in detail the number of acres protected by sector (state government, local government, etc.), by program and by time period. Footnotes at the bottom of the page note special circumstances in some of the accounting. The end result is a conservative presentation of the totals. It is likely that the numbers presented here could be adjusted upward between 10,000 to 30,000 acres. To avoid frustration and embarrassment in the future, only official reports of new acquisitions (from surveys, interviews and questionnaires) make it into the final total. Estimations for non-respondents are not included.

It should be noted that, while our rate of land protection is encouraging, we have not yet reached an annual rate that will allow us to meet the goal of permanently protecting an additional million acres by Dec. 31, 2009 (G.S. 113A-240 and 241). The primary barrier is the availability of public and private funding for new protection projects. If we intend to meet the Million Acre goal by the end of 2009, more money for land protection must be found. The graphic below illustrates progress toward the Million Acre goal.

1,000,000 900,000 800,000 700,000 600,000 400,000 100,000 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008

Table 1 Progress toward our goal of one million acres of permanently protected open space

### The Program

In addition to working to increase the rate at which we are protecting land in North Carolina, the Million Acre Initiative continues to work towards making information about land protection tools and techniques more broadly available, and to encourage conservation planning. As noted in the 2004 report, because there are so many shared goals, the Million Acre Initiative has joined the One North Carolina Naturally effort. The Million Acre Initiative, in conjunction with One North Carolina Naturally and other partners, continues to slowly but steadily increase awareness among North Carolinians about the need for additional land conservation to protect our valuable natural ecosystems.

The Million Acre Initiative has identified potential focus areas for reaching the goal in a manner that maximizes benefit to biodiversity conservation. Within the N.C. Natural Heritage Program 'Macrosites' are approximately 3 million acres of unprotected land – areas that contribute to ecosystem function for clusters of natural areas and/or managed lands. These areas include undeveloped and little-degraded lands as well as farmland and revenue-generating forests that buffer natural areas. This approach helps focus protection of open space, without specifically targeting one million acres of private land. While the Million Acre Initiative has been working to identify targeted areas for conservation, other planning efforts are underway, including the

One North Carolina Naturally initiative, the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, and the Land for Tomorrow Coalition five-year plan.

Notable among these, the One North Carolina Naturally effort followed up on the forums held across the State and the 14 local and regional open space planning efforts encompassing 92 counties across North Carolina by compiling data and maps on existing open space resources, and highlighting regional and state priorities. These local and regional efforts also informed the update of the One North Carolina Naturally statewide conservation plan. The updated map was released at the statewide "Value\$ of Conservation" conference in March. Data from each of these regional plans is incorporated into the Web-based N.C. Conservation Land Map Viewer where the data are continually updated. One NC Naturally hopes to catalyze a regional focus and provide information that provides an effective forum for decision-making about conservation in our communities. This online decision support tool can provide key information vital to successful planning efforts. Using this interactive map viewer, local and regional planners, conservation organizations and others will be able to zoom in on specific areas of their community. Selected geospatial layers reveal critical features such as habitats, water bodies and infrastructure. Future versions of our conservation map will include statewide greenway and trail data as well as canoe trails and boat access points.

The "Value\$ of Conservation" conference also focused on ways we are protecting some of North Carolina's most critical economies - tourism, farm and forest lands, seafood, military bases - through conservation. Many outstanding presenters shared their perspectives on the critical relationship between conservation and a healthy North Carolina economy, of which approximately 25 percent is derived from industries and business that directly rely on our state's natural resources. Conference speakers included: former Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., Senate President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight and House of Representatives Majority Leader Joe Hackney; Secretary Carmen Hooker-Odom of the Department of Health and Human Services and Commerce Secretary Jim Fain clarified how intact natural systems support public health, economic development and tourism; William Schlesinger, dean of Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment, spoke of the need to find economic solutions to environmental problems; Bill Medlin, executive director of the Yadkin-Pee Dee Lakes Project, an innovative

citizen-based regional strategic planning initiative for the Uwharrie Lakes Region in central North Carolina, spoke of the initiative's challenges and economic benefits; and, Dr. David Jones of the N.C. Zoo talked of the choices we need to start making now to ensure that North Carolina will be sustainable for the 22nd century.

## **Looking Ahead**

The 71,451 acres permanently protected in 2004 was a great step forward, and it is anticipated that 2005 will also be a good year for new land protection projects. A major reason for the 2004 increase in protected acreage is the establishment of the Ecosystem Enhancement Program. In two years of the program, July 2003 - July 2005, EEP and its partners have protected more than 30,000 acres, preserving 126 miles of stream and 6,984 acres of wetlands. Acquisitions for an additional 134 miles of stream and 1,931 acres of wetlands are in progress. EEP funding contributed to the purchase of portions of large protected areas that will be open to the public and managed as state parks or game lands, including the Needmore Game Land, Buffalo Cove Game Land, Mitchell River Game Land, Haw Slopes State Natural Area and three tracts that were added to Eno River State Park. Another protected area acquired by EEP adjoins Blue Ridge Parkway lands – providing water quality and habitat benefits and protecting the view. Obviously, the EEP efforts to use preservation as a mitigation tool have provided a number of benefits, and the Million Acre Initiative would encourage North Carolina to continue this innovative and successful approach to mitigation.

The gaps in North Carolina's conservation funding remain a challenge. The FY 06/07 \$17.2 billion state budget approved by the North Carolina General Assembly includes \$100 million for the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund, marking the first time CWMTF has received its full level of funding. However, new applications totaled more than \$90 million in requests for the 2005B grant cycle alone (a six-month period).

It will be difficult to meet the Million Acres goal without a working lands component that helps to maintain local production of agriculture and forest products. Of particular interest would be a dedicated source of funding for conservation of North Carolina's farms and forest lands. There

have been numerous suggestions for ways to generate funding, and it is time to examine some of these suggestions more closely.

2004 and the past several years have not shown significant federal land protection efforts. The Million Acre Initiative endorses increased spending in all programs (e.g. Wetland Reserve Program for private lands; U.S. Forest Service acquisition to fill in gaps in Uwharrie National Forest and connect recreation trails; increased money to fund U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service national wildlife refuges and conserve additional habitat for public trust wildlife; additional funding for Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program and Forest Legacy).

On the private conservation side, Ducks Unlimited Sound CARE program is a comprehensive conservation initiative to protect, restore and enhance wetland habitat in North Carolina and the breeding areas that are most important to waterfowl wintering in North Carolina. The Sound CARE program has a five-year goal of 22,000 acres — 11,000 acres / \$3 million for land protection; 3,000 acres / \$3.5 million for work on public lands; and 8,000 acres / \$4.5 million for work on private lands.

The upcoming year offers a chance to respond to a number of opportunities, and to think big. Notification that one of North Carolina's largest landowners, International Paper, is considering the sale of all of its land in North Carolina (more than 600,000 acres) reminds us that we need funding in place to react to such opportunities. While the state would only be interested in acquiring a fraction of the International Paper properties, and has the plan in place to identify priority parcels, there is a lack of funding to conserve a significant portion of these lands as open space for future generations. Some places, such as the Waccamaw River/Juniper Creek area, present a window of opportunity with a number of ecologically significant parcels becoming available simultaneously that would protect biodiversity habitat and provide recreation opportunities at an impressive scale. State and federal agencies and private organizations can hopefully work together to at least conserve some of the most ecologically significant areas, and the Million Acre Initiative and One NC Naturally will assist as possible.

In the coming months the Million Acre Initiative and One NC Naturally will work to implement recommendations from local public input. The One North Carolina Naturally Program continues to work with regions to determine appropriate next steps and to develop implementation strategies for the various regional plans. Specific projects will vary depending on the needs within each region. These efforts make it possible to see how individual green spaces and working landscapes across North Carolina fit together into a network of essential green infrastructure. Understanding the interrelationships among those areas will help us target our protection efforts so that we maximize the cost effectiveness and the natural protection value of our investment, and improve North Carolina's quality of life. As tens of thousands of acres each year are permanently altered from their existing natural condition for new development, increased awareness about the importance of setting aside some portion of our critical and unique lands is essential, and providing information and conservation tools is part of our job. The partners listed in the attached summary table will no doubt continue their efforts, and the One North Carolina Naturally program will look for ways to expand land conservation efforts, and make the future greener for our state.

#### **Acres Under Permanent Protection**

(note: a blank cell means no data were collected. 0 means no land was protected)

		Acres Protected	Acres Protected	Sub-Total	Acres Protected	"Million Acre"
State Agency	category	1/99 - 12/02	1/03 - 12/03	through 2003	1/04 - 12/04	Total
DENR - FOREST RESOURCES	state forest	5,074	642	5,716	1,117	6,833
	conservation reserve					
DENR - SOIL AND WATER	enhancement program	1,411	459	1,870		·
14// 24/55 25004/2050	hog farm buyout	943	84	1,027	386	1,413
WILDLIFE RESOURCES	game lands	49,879	11,394	61,273	33,721	94,994
DENR - Ecosystem Enhancement Program(*)	wetlands & riparian mitigation	593	935	1,528	7,776	9,304
DENR - PARKS AND REC.	state park	19,896	1,437	21,333		
	state natural area	366	2,032	2,398	2,831	5,229
	state rec area	0	2	2	0	
DENR - COASTAL MNGMT.	coastal reserves	28,903	58	28,961	0	28,961
	public beach/access	0	0	0		0
	submerged lands	0	0	0		0
DoA&CS - PLANT INDUSTRY	state nature preserve	6,972	2,039	9,011	517	9,528
	other lands			0		0
DCR - HISTORIC SITES	state historic sites	477	66	543	23	566
STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM	university property					
SUBTOTALS		114,514	19,148	133,662	48,965	182,626
Local Governments						
CITY AND COUNTY GOVERNMENTS	parks, greenways, watersheds,					
(**)	etc.	16,224	1,211	17,435	2,159	19,594
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SUBTOTALS		16,224	1,211	17,435	2,159	19,594
Federal Agency						
US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE	national wildlife refuge	6,761	3,489	10,250	,	
USDA FOREST SERVICE(***)	national forests	5,045	1,398	6,443	336	6,779
USDA-NRCS WETLAND RESERVE PROGRAM	wetlands reserve	5,043	4,487	9,530	899	10,429
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE	national park	6,675	0	6,675		7,547
		5,5.7	-	0,0.0	0.2	.,
SUBTOTALS		23,524	9,374	32,898	4,536	37,434
Local Land Trusts						
NC LAND TRUSTS (****)	protected lands	47,657	16 405	04.450	40.440	74,301
NC LAND TRUSTS (*****)	protected lands	47,057	16,495	64,152	10,149	74,301
SUBTOTALS		47,657	16,495	64,152	10,149	74,301
0001011/20		,	10,100	04,132	10,149	1 1,001
Other Conservation					l	
Groups						
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY(*****)	nature preserves	18,402	2,296	20,698	4,944	25,642
	nature preserves	0	0	0	0	0
AUDUBON SOCIETY		0	0	0	0	
AUDUBON SOCIETY  AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST	farmland					626
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC	farmland historic preservation	636		636		
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC NC COASTAL FEDERATION	historic preservation nature preserves	636 4,935	288	5,223	252	5,475
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC	historic preservation	636	288 3,338		252	5,475
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC NC COASTAL FEDERATION DUCKS UNLIMITED(******)	historic preservation nature preserves	636 4,935 2,597	3,338	5,223 5,935	252 446	5,475 6,381
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC NC COASTAL FEDERATION	historic preservation nature preserves	636 4,935		5,223	252	
AMERICAN FARMLAND TRUST PRESERVATION NC NC COASTAL FEDERATION DUCKS UNLIMITED(******)	historic preservation nature preserves	636 4,935 2,597	3,338 5,922	5,223 5,935 32,492	252 446 5,642	5,475 6,381 38,134

<sup>\*</sup>Formerly Wetlands Restoration Program. EEP closed on 18,892 acres in 2004; 11,116 of those acres are held by other state agencies or land trusts.

<sup>\*\*</sup>Local governments include LWCF projects closed, PARTF projects funded, CWMTF local projects closed, and counties that responded to information requests.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>National Forests in North Carolina reports on fiscal year.

<sup>\*\*\*\*25</sup> local land trusts that regularly partner with the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. Local land trusts also conveyed 7,011 acres to local, state, and federal government in 2004, and assisted in partnership or facilitated the purchase of 7,687 acres of protected lands.

<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>The Nature Conservancy closed on 13,902 acres in 2004. TNC transferred 8,958 of those acres to the State of North Carolina.

\*\*\*\*\*\*DU requested a correction of acreage figures from previous years, adjusting totals for Million Acres. Also assisted in transfer of Saltworks tract to NC WRC.